

Remarks at Fort Drum, New York

June 23, 2011

Thank you, everybody. Thank you. I don't want to give a long speech, because I want to spend most of my time just shaking hands and thanking all of you.

Colonel Burleson, thank you so much for your leadership. To Sergeant Major Defreese and Parham, to all of you, there's a reason I wanted to come here today. As the colonel just mentioned, in 2009, after having been in Afghanistan for 7 years, but having, I think, lost a sense of focus in terms of how we were going to accomplish our mission, I made the most difficult decision that I've made as President, and that is to deploy an additional 30,000 troops into Afghanistan so that we could turn back Taliban momentum, so that we could continue to go after Al Qaida aggressively, and so that we could make sure that we were training an Afghan security force that had the capacity to secure their own country.

The only reason I was able to make that decision was because I knew that we had the finest fighting force in the world and that if I gave a command to our troops, they would be able to accomplish that mission. If we were focused and if we were clear in terms of what we were going to try to accomplish, I knew that we could get it done.

And the 10th Mountain Division, this storied—this group that has been there for America day in, day out throughout our history, was the first folks to go in after that order was given. And that's not surprising because you guys were also some of the first folks to go in right after 9/11.

Throughout my service, first as a Senator and then as a Presidential candidate and then as a President, I've always run into you guys. And for some reason, it's always in some rough spots.

First time I saw 10th Mountain Division, you guys were in southern Iraq. When I went back to visit Afghanistan, you guys were the first ones there. I had the great honor of seeing some of you because a comrade of yours, Jared Monti, was the first person who I was able to award the Medal of Honor to who actually came back and wasn't receiving it posthumously [sic].*

And so you guys have always been there in the toughest fights. And the fact that you are continuing, even as we speak, that many of your comrades are there right now under some very tough circumstances, is a testimony to your dedication and your patriotism.

Now, last night I gave a speech in which I said that we have turned a corner where we can begin to bring back some of our troops. We're not doing it precipitously. We're going to do it in a steady way to make sure that the gains that all of you helped to bring about are going to be sustained. But because of your outstanding work, what we've been able to do is train an additional hundred thousand Afghan soldiers so that they can start carrying on the fight.

Because of what you've done, areas like Kandahar are more secure than they have been in years. Because of you, we're now taking the fight to the Taliban instead of the Taliban bringing the fight to us. And because of you, there are signs that the Taliban may be interested in

* See note below.

figuring out a political settlement, which ultimately is going to be critical for consolidating that country.

It's also because of you that we had the platform to be able to go after bin Laden and Al Qaida. And we have decimated their ranks. Al Qaida leadership, half of them have been killed, and most of them are now on the run and they can't operate as effectively as they could.

And so as I look around this room, I suspect that some of you joined the military after 9/11 because you had seen fellow Americans suffer at the hands of bin Laden. And when we got them—when we got him, and as we keep on driving to get the rest of them, it's because of the work and the sacrifice that you guys have made.

Now, the 10th Mountain and the 1st Brigade, you guys have sacrificed mightily. I know that you got 11 fallen soldiers just out of this group right here, and I think about 270 all told since 9/11.

We will never forget their sacrifice. And the reason that, I know, many of you continue to do the outstanding work that you do is not only love of country, but it's also love for each other and your commitment to making sure that those sacrifices were not in vain.

So the main message I have for all of you here today is that the American people understand the sacrifices you're making, they understand the sacrifices that your families are making. Our job is not finished.

If you looked at the schedule that I set forth, we're only bringing out 10,000 by the end of this year. We're going to bring out all 33,000 that we surged by next summer. But there's still some fighting to be done. And then we're still going to have 68,000. And frankly, the 10th Mountain Division is still going to be represented there until we have fully transferred to the Afghan military and security forces.

But I hope that all of you can both take pride in what you've done over the past years, but also understand that there's a future there that is brighter not only for the Afghan people, but for—most importantly, for American security. And you guys are the tip of the spear. You guys are the ones that keep us safe each and every day.

So for all the sacrifices that you've made, I want to say thank you. For all the sacrifices that your families have made, I want to say thank you. I have no greater job, nothing gives me more honor, than serving as your Commander in Chief. And to all of you who are potentially going to be redeployed, just know that your Commander in Chief has your back.

So thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. "Climb to Glory." Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:52 p.m. in the 10th Combat Aviation Brigade dining facility. In his remarks, he referred to Col. Willard M. Burleson, USA, commander, and CSM Dennis E. Defreese, USA, command sergeant major, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division; CSM Terry E. Parham, Sr., USA, post command sergeant major, Fort Drum. He also referred to SFC Jared C. Monti, USA, who was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor on September 17, 2009.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Fort Drum, NY.

Locations: Fort Drum, NY.

Names: Burleson, Willard M.; Defreese, Dennis E.; Parham, Terry E., Sr.

Subjects: Afghanistan : Afghan military and security forces; Afghanistan : Former regime; Afghanistan : President Obama's visit; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Deaths: bin Laden, Usama; Decorations, medals, and awards : Congressional Medal of Honor; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; New York : President's visit; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Terrorism : Global threat; Terrorism : September 11, 2001, attacks.

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